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ABSTRACT

At present, college entrance examinations unfortunately determine only those students who will achieve good grades at the university level, thus ignoring the individual and social needs of minority students by avoiding an estimation of their knowledge and ability to do the reading and writing necessary outside the university. Both the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the American College Test examinations test reading ability well, while the writing tests reflect their authorship by examiners with trivial ideas of grammar who ignore content and the clear distinctions among usage, phraseology, and style. To rectify the problem, college teachers must grade students' papers by content, organization, and expressive language. Ultimately, however, an examination on composition should require a composition. (JM)

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"Really, Now You Ask Me," Said Alice

A Shuffling Speech on Slavery to Exams

James Sledd

I must begin by thanking my colleague, Jim Kinneavy, who got me this place on the program, provided me with everything I read in preparing for it, and is totally innocent of any outrage I may commit.

To that vindication of an innocent bystander, I must add the confession that as a mathematical ignoramus I am baffled by the technicalities of testing. My remarks must be limited to the subjects I'm possibly competent to teach--namely, some kinds of reading and writing and some aspects of English linguistics--and to the definition of purposes for the tests in question. I send my conscience back to sleep with the probably delusive notion that if teachers tell them generally what to do, the professional examiners can handle the technicalities.

Besides providing employment for several large and self-satisfied bureaucracies, entrance examinations are used at

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present to decide which students will most likely get good grades from teachers like us--and so, indirectly, to decide which students should be admitted to the pleasure of our company. Our colleges are thus kept mainly white and middle class, except for their athletic teams, where inferiors must be tolerated so that scouts, recruiters, tutors, press-agents, coaches, knee-surgeons, and drunken rich alumni may continue to flourish.

Admission to college should not, of course, depend on our grading habits, but on individual and social needs, among them the over-riding need of education for many more of our minority students than presently get it. Initial examinations should not be obstacles to admission but devices to estimate the knowledge and abilities of the examined, so that enlightened decisions may be made.

The knowledge and ability that we English teachers most need to estimate are not primarily the knowledge and ability that maybe most of us most value. We don't need to know whether our

students can imitate the essays in a casebook on King Lear or can utter five hundred words about nothing in a personal voice. We need to know whether they can do, or learn to do, the kinds of reading and writing that will help them most as students in sensible courses and as citizens when they've left us for what they call "the real world."

About the necessity of testing the ability to read, I think we're not likely to disagree very much--though I know that among academics the most innocuous statement may bring out a swarm of bees. The ability to read means the ability to read standard English as it is written by scientists or their secretaries as well as by humanists. That is one reason why I have said that nobody could seriously propose that standard English should not be taught at all--a statement which bidialectalists have expedientially ignored. When Texaco makes me president of a new University of the Tidelands, I shall deny certification to bidialectalists who have scored below the national mean on the

SAT verbal or on the reading tests of the American College Testing Program (ACT). I believe those examinations test reading ability rather well. I only wish they encouraged a bit more emphasis on distinctions between honest and dishonest argument.

About the need for testing the ability to write, and about the means of testing it, we're not only likely to disagree, but certain to. Since the bees in that hive will swarm no matter what I say, caution is useless, and I can now indulge myself, happily, in the threatened outrage.

In the writing exams that I've looked at, I have little confidence. The people who make them either don't know anything about writing or can't find readers who do, and their notions of English grammar and English usage are insistently trivial. Specifically:

The American College Testing Program lists "the basic elements in correct and effective writing" as "usage, phraseology, style, and organization." Ideas aren't mentioned, and it's impossible

to detect really clear distinctions among usage, phraseology, and style. In the examination that probes the mastery of these "basic elements," logic and organization together get 4 of 75 items; grammar and punctuation get 26; sentence structure--which is oddly opposed to grammar--gets 19; and the remaining 26 are assigned to diction. By its very existence the exam defines our subject as nit-picking (which less resolute pickers than I am are now beginning to spell with initial kn-).

If the ACT defines our subject as nit-picking, the CLEP exams define it as indefinable. They focus on such "principles of rhetoric" as proof-reading, punctuation, the mechanics of the research paper, and transformational sentence-combining. They look as if Miss Fidditch had made them in a state of hysteria.

But the big bull of the woods among the exams in English is the composition achievement test of the College Board, which was inflicted on 355,930 college-bound students in 1971-72. It's an exam in proof-reading and detailed revision, in finding

and classifying presumed mistakes and revising isolated sentences. It invites students and teachers to concentrate on multiple negation, the case of pronouns, the agreement of pronouns with antecedents and of verbs with subjects, the choice of conjunctions, the use of quantifiers with countable and uncountable nouns, the forms of foreign-learned plurals, the sequence of tenses, devices for avoiding the passive voice, words easily confused by adept confusers, illogical comparisons, adjectives faking as adverbs, fractured parallelism, the public exhibition of indecent danglers. Since I once demonstrated, in rude print, that bidialectalists are indictable for most of those offenses, and since in the recent past our profession plumped for bidialectalism, I am amused by the popularity of the ECT. To me it seems to have been made by a whole coven of Fidditches, conjuring with the first edition of the Harbrace Handbook and the public statements of Casey Stengel; yet now, I hear, a "test of English usage" like the ECT but easier is to be added to the

SAT in a two-year experiment. I doubt that grammatical politesse defines scholastic aptitude.

My complacence, however, is fragile. The College Entrance people say their exams reflect what teachers teach and what teachers can grade. When the ECT was an essay examination, the graders couldn't agree very well in identifying good, bad, and middling papers; but objective questions and interlinear editing are very good predictors of grades in college, where interlinear editing and objective questions must be big deals. The answer hurts because it is true--and may the Lord blot out our iniquities and renew a right spirit within us!

What shall we do about it besides making prayerful speeches? If we don't like what we see in our mirror, we must wash our faces. We must learn something serious about rhetoric as it's really practiced in real writing--not in 500-word themes; we must learn how standard languages operate not just to preserve or sometimes embalm an invaluable literary tradition but also

--and brutally--to keep all us dogs in our proper places, upper or under; and we must learn to grade our students' papers by their content, their organization, and the clear and expressive use of the students' language, whether standard or not.

When we have learned those things, or started to learn them, we will have firm ground to stand on as we question the ECT and its congeners. There is no reason to be impressed by the fact that an examination successfully predicts the grades which teachers like us now give. That may be one of its faults. It is another fault if the examination tells hundreds of thousands of students every year that the discipline of English is studious concentration on inessentials. Before I die, I'd like a little freedom from that discipline. An examination on composition should require a composition.

We should also remember--not as a deterrent, but as a challenge--that in a society where some people despise others, some speech will be despised as well, and that those who use it will suffer, no matter what well-meaning pedagogues may do about ex-

aminations. Achievement appraisal in Texas has shown that the higher the socioeconomic status of the pupils' families, the higher the pupils' scores on the ACT; but Anglo seniors from the lowest socioeconomic group made mean scores higher than those made by seniors from the highest socioeconomic group among the ethnic minorities. Upward mobility on the scale of status does not bring freedom; for a child, the world's contempt turns easily into self-contempt. In a fit of unwonted self-awareness, I will leave it to your sanctimony and not mine to draw the appropriate conclusions.

--James Sledd

The University of Texas at Austin
April 3, 1974